

News Coverage on Property Tax Reform

Under tax cap, 'yes' prevails

[Scott Waldman](#) [1] [2] [2] [2] [2]

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Voters in virtually every school district in the state approved their school budgets on Tuesday.

In 96 percent of districts, voters approved their budgets, according to the [New York State School Boards Association](#) [4]. Of the 24 that failed, 19 were attempts to override the new tax cap.

That means 99 percent of budgets within the new tax cap passed, according to the association. The rate was much lower among the 48 that attempted to override the cap with a supermajority, as just 60 percent passed.

During a visit to Syracuse Wednesday, Gov. [Andrew Cuomo](#) [5] said the main complaint he has heard in his 17 months as governor was about high property taxes. He said the tax cap had imposed a necessary fiscal discipline on schools.

"We changed the culture, we changed the dialogue and we changed it from automatic tax increases to maybe we have to find some economies of scale," he said.

Locally, the only budget to be shot down by voters was in Stillwater. Though a majority of voters approved the budget, it did not receive the 60 percent required to override the tax cap. The board will meet next to decide whether it will put forward the same budget, develop a new budget or go to a contingency.

The [New York State United Teachers union](#) [6] is considering a lawsuit over the cap because it appears to be exacerbating a growing gap between wealthy and poor districts, spokesman [Carl Korn](#) [7] said. He said the overrides across the state may have only occurred in rich districts, not poor ones, which creates the inequity.

"It appears, at least preliminarily, high-wealth districts were able to override the cap more easily than those districts that are low-wealth," he said.

In some local districts, including Guilderland and Shenendehowa, the budget passed by the widest margin in at least 15 years. In Albany, which has had some nail-biting close votes as well as some rejections in recent years, the budget passed with a 70 percent approval. However, the 4,210 Albany residents who showed up at the polls were a significantly smaller number than the 6,937 who voted last year.

By contrast, in Bethlehem, a record high of more than 6,000 voters turned out and the line for the polls snaked out the door of the high school. Voters easily overrode the tax cap with a 63 percent margin.

The number of budgets that passed is a notable increase from last year, when 93 percent of districts passed their budgets. The average, since 1969, is 84 percent.

Districts across the state made major cuts to staff and programs to fall under the cap. Two-thirds cut teachers and 99 percent drew down their rapidly dwindling reserves. Tuesday's results show that voters recognized the sacrifices that have been made in recent years, School Boards Executive Director [Timothy Kremer](#) [8] said.

"The voting public has once again shown its strong support for education," he said in a statement. "Voters recognized that school leaders did everything they could to comply with the

spirit and intent of the property tax levy cap."

The budget vote next year could see some districts on the brink of fiscal or educational insolvency, said [Charles Dedrick](#) ^[9], district superintendent of the [Capital Region Board of Cooperative Educational Services](#) ^[10]. He said the important lesson in Tuesday's vote is that voters are concerned about their districts.

Unless some significant mandate relief occurs, Dedrick said, some districts next year will have to cut full-day kindergarten, sports and everything that is not mandated by law. He said Albany must take on the difficult question of mandate relief and look at the retirement contributions, special education requirements and the regionalization of high schools.

"I don't want people in Albany to say 'All is well' and walk away," he said.

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